Black, Jack. 2020. "'Sport and the 'National Thing': Exploring Sport's Emotive Significance." Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics.

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Abstract

This article critically details how the work of Slavoj Žižek theoretically elaborates on the links between nationalism and sport. Notably, it highlights how key terms, drawn from Žižek's work on fantasy, ideology and the Real (itself grounded in the work of Jacques Lacan), can be used to explore the relationship between sport, nationalism and enjoyment (jouissance). In outlining this approach, specific attention is given to Žižek's account of the 'national Thing'. Accordingly, by considering the various ways in which sport organizes, materializes and structures our enjoyment, the emotive significance of sport during national sporting occasions is both introduced and applied. Moreover, it is argued that such an approach offers a unique and valuable insight into the relationship between sport and nationalism, as well as an array of social and political antagonisms.

Introduction

Despite many politicians, entrepreneurs and journalists hailing the 'end of the nation-state', today, the nation maintains a particular importance in the practices and imaginations of large swathes of the world's population. As evident in recent political movements, which promise a national restoration (fueled by xenophobia, racial politics and a litany of national myths, fantasies and traditions), 'the nation' continues to uphold a certain emotive and contested significance – but also, a theoretical importance. Though critical discussions on the 'decline' of the nation have sought to trace its

descendance in relation to technological and capital advancements, this article will argue that the nation procures a unique significance in forms of enjoyment and desire – of which, sport provides an important locus of examination.

In view of this importance, this article will critically detail how the work of Slavoj Žižek can be used to explore the links between nationalism and sport (Žižek, 1993). Drawing from Žižek's (1992, 2008a, 2008b) work on fantasy, ideology and the Real (itself grounded in the work of Jacques Lacan), it will be noted how examples of nationalism are underscored by enjoyment (*jouissance*): that is, sport presents a key opportunity for sustaining national sentiments via a mediated consumption that proffers intense enjoyment (and pain) for national communities. Specifically, this discussion will be grounded in an explanation of how the role of the 'Other/other', as well as the effects of fantasy and the Real, can help to critically explore the antagonisms and impasses embedded in sporting nationalisms. These non-discursive practices are, according to Žižek (1993), what constitute the subject's nationalization and, for the purposes of this article, will subsequently be used to outline, critique and evaluate the ideological significance of sport, nationalism and national identity. In doing so, this article will assert that sport provides a shared cultural practice that serves to materialize and maintain relations with one's 'national Thing'. By examining the various ways in which sporting spectacles organize, materialize and structure our enjoyment, the emotive significance of sporting occasions – such as, international sporting mega-events – will be discussed in the conclusion. Notably, these mega-events are unique in their capacity to offer 'constructions' of the nation, exemplified during 'opening and closing ceremonies'. Accordingly, the conclusion will comment upon the retroactive significance of these occasions as well as their capacity to display a level of national fantasy, that both avers and delimits the national Thing.

Myth, history and loss: A return to 'national origins'

It is evident that the study of nationalism poses just as many theories as it does contentions regarding the historical significance, socio-political emergence and cultural particularity of the nation and its associated population. Other accounts have sought to examine how the individual becomes embroiled as part of the 'national popular' (Gramsci, 1971), as well as those which seek to locate the nation in banal, everyday routines (Bilig, 1995; Edensor, 2002; Skey, 2011), which help to aver its 'presence' in a collection of lived performances. Indeed, many of these practices prove constitutive of a community whose 'national' character remains largely 'imagined' (Anderson, 2006). It is through these taken-for-granted performances that differences between the national 'us' and the foreign 'they' become socially learned (Elias, 2001).

However, for many, these differences reveal wider contentions with regards to the literature on globalisation and the apparent homogenization or heterogenization of national cultures (Bairner, 2001; Maguire, 1999). These trends seek to delineate the various ways in which national cultures have been extended and inhibited by global transformations, including the post-1989 expansion of a liberal democratic order, based on the free movement of capital (Jameson, 1991), as well as earlier forms of imperial expansion and decline (Author, 2018). Nevertheless, despite what has been celebrated as the 'global village', the proliferation of nations post-World War Two, has continued to result in examples of xenophobia, ethnic violence and, more recently, a revival in far-right politics fueled by anti-immigration rhetoric. For many of these movements, the return to some form of previous 'greatness' (note, Trump's 'Make America Great

Again') has merely served to accentuate and ultimately propagate tensions *within* globalization (Žižek, 1992).

To this extent, a return to the *historical emergence* of the nation can help to elaborate upon these tensions, with examples of national traditions, myths and collective historical narratives proving to have a continuing importance in contemporary national movements and sporting occasions. Here, modernist approaches, such as the work of Gellner (2006), have turned to the industrial revolution in order to identify the complex ways in which capitalism helped to establish an economic and political elite, whose authority became embroiled with a distinct sense of national purpose. By artificially creating the nation, a proliferation of national traditions – largely 'invented' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) – were established

These 'modernist' approaches stand in contrast to primordial conceptions of the nation, which see its significance and importance in national myths that are not simply constructed, but also culturally transmuted. This latter approach underscores 'ethno-symbolic' conceptions of the nation, which redirect attention to the historical timeliness of national historical narratives. Smith (2012, 193) explains:

> Even it elements of ethnicity are 'constructed' and 'reconstructed' and sometimes plainly 'invented', the fact that such activities have been operating for centuries, even millennia, and that several ethnies while changing their cultural character have nevertheless persisted as identifiable communities over long periods, suggests that we ignore the presence and influence exerted by such communities on the formation of modern nations at our peril.

Smith's (2012) ethnic approach has been extended in work by Bell (2003), who has continued to examine the effects of these myths in forms of national collective memory.

Indeed, what underlies these approaches, however, is the assertion that the 'deep ties' that nationalism seems to evoke go beyond any mere 'invention'. As Smith (2012, 191) asserts, 'there is more to the formation of nations than nationalist fabrication, and "invention" must be understood in its other sense of a novel recombination of existing elements'. Smith's (2012) reference to a 'recombination of existing elements' helps to shed light on the 'social bonds' that nationalism adeptly provides. While historical accounts of the nation's past can be used to procure a collective sense of 'national destiny' (Anderson, 2006), much of the 'meaning' which is attributed to this history relies primarily on 'existing elements' that retroactively define the nation (Žižek, 2014). This retroactive construction of the national past can expose the socio-political tensions of the moment and how current forms of national culture and identity remain tied to historical debate and contestation (Author, 2020b).

What is clear, therefore, is that such debates are not forged with the *past*, but with political tensions in the *present*. This can be seen in periods of 'national reconciliation', where the capacity to define what counts as 'national reconciliation', relies upon an antagonistic struggle between various group, each vying for political hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). Such contestation bears witness to a *formal* significance, which brings together forms of postcolonial struggle, alongside far-right assertions to 'reclaim' the nation. Despite their varying political motivations, in both cases, we see a 'return to origins' fueled by 'processes of lost and regained national identity' (Žižek, 2014, 136). Žižek (2014, 136-137) asserts:

> In the process of its revival, a nation-in-becoming experiences its present constellation in terms of a loss of precious origins, which it then strives to regain. In reality, however, there were no origins that were subsequently lost, for the origins are constituted through the very experience of their loss and the striving to return to them. … This holds for every return to origins: when, from the nineteenth century onwards, new nation-states popped up across Central and Eastern Europe, their returning to 'old ethnic roots' generated these very roots, producing what the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm calls 'invented traditions'.[1]

It is in this way that 'a nation finds its sense of self-identity by means of such a tautological gesture, i.e., by way of discovering itself as already present in its tradition' (Žižek, 1993, 148). This gesture brings together both 'past' and 'present' through a consideration of the significance of ideology and fantasy in both constructing the nation as well as 'freeing' it from those antagonisms (threats from 'the other'), which, in some form or another, seek to undermine the nation's unity. Such unity is what fuels liberation struggles, underscored by a desire to 'return' to some former existence (Collins and Hannifin, 2001).

As noted, such a 'return' proves indicative of postcolonial, liberation and far-right narratives as well as helping to define and make sense of traumatic national events, such as 9/11. In the case of the US, Solomon (2014, 675) identifies how post-9/11 political rhetoric revealed examples of a 'retroactive temporality and desire'. Accordingly:

> In the war on terror, the ideal of a complete and unified nation free of threats and antagonisms is an image that covers over the constitutive ambiguities and divisions of such an entity. A unified 'America' is posited as lost, yet, such an 'America' did not, in fact, exist before 9/11. (Solomon, 2014: 678).

It is in this regard that we can begin to ascertain the role of fantasy in helping to maintain and construct the nation. While these fantasies remain predicated upon some 'missing part', that subsequently needs 'returning', further connections can be made towards the constitutive role of fantasy in sporting nationalisms.[2]

The relationship to sport and nationalism will be returned to shortly; for now, what the above discussion has sought to trace is how our understandings of the nation and nationalism can become enveloped through national myths which seek to obscure a sense of national loss. There is, in this respect, an ongoing need 'to account for the agency that is evidently a part of nationalism and for the fervour, loyalty and passion that it can inspire' (Finlayson, 1998, 146). If examples of 'national heritage' and 'national myths' reveal a retroactive importance that allows both ideology and fantasy to mask present antagonisms (Žižek, 1993, 2014), and if the enjoyment which these myths can aver proves integral to assuring one's belief, trust and relation to 'the nation'; then, extending these assertions to the analytical importance and sense of enjoyment that sport provides, can be theoretically useful in detailing sport's social, political and national significance. In what follows, this significance will be considered from a psychoanalytic approach, drawing primarily from the work of Slavoj Žižek and his reference to the national Thing (Žižek, 1993). The benefits of this approach will be concluded with an examination on the importance of the national Thing for sport.

Sport and the nation – 'identification with the very gesture of identification'

There is no doubt that individuals are in some way tied to the nation through intangible dynamics. Here, national symbols and beliefs, often resonate with a variety of individuals who feel a clear sense of affiliation and identification (Giddens, 1987). Yet, as noted by Finlayson (1998), it is also apparent that understandings of nationalism go beyond a simple individual-society causality (and vice versa), towards a process of identification, whereby both the subject and object (the nation) are simultaneously defined. Importantly, this process 'is not an identification with any concrete thing; it is rather *identification with the very gesture of identification*' (Hook, 2008, 65 see also Žižek, 2006).

The previous section sought to locate this 'gesture' in relation to the retroactive significance of the nation; a significance fueled by a return to 'ethnic roots'. However, the importance of this significance is not one that is simply achieved through the power of political discourse, but, rather, points to a specific form of enjoyment that helps to outline the particularities of a group's 'way of life'. It is on these grounds that we can begin to trace the unique sense of personal sacrifice that the nation seems to evoke, as well as the less violent manner in which large populations literally 'stop' what they are doing in order to watch and support their nation's sporting endeavours (Author, 2020a). In fact, amidst 'All the different forms of a passionate "return" to ethnic, cultural, religious or nationalist "roots"' it is 'the violent-emotional moment of "recognition", of becoming aware of one's "true" belonging' which seems to offer, for many, a unique 'answer to the experience of social life as fleeting and non-substantial, of being "adrift in the world"' (Moolenaar, 2004, 286).

Here, sport offers an opportunity for such recognition to be displayed, often in coded forms of national support that allow one to delineate oneself from neighboring nations and competitors (Whigham, 2014). In reality, however, sport never provides any 'complete' rendering of such affiliation, but, instead, remains embroiled in its own complications and antagonisms related to the use of 'foreign' athletes for international competitions (Author et al., 2020; Author and Author, 2020), as well as multi-national state formations, where various nations compete as 'one' team (the United Kingdom being a unique example) (Author and Author, 2017; Author, 2018). If anything, these antagonisms point to the fact that 'establishing a definitive conception of the nation is never completed, just as the process of establishing a permanent, fixed, subjectivity is ever incomplete' (Finlayson, 1998, 158). What is more, it is this lack of permanence that sport seems to encourage, through its competitive, unpredictable form. Commenting upon the sport of football, Kingsbury (2011, 730, italics added) notes how:

> Football's numerous lacks, that is, the unpredictability of the outcome of a football match … and its panoply of 'negative' experiences that range from mild half-expected disappointment to crushing depression in defeat are not so much obstacles as *the very stuff of the national Thing*.

It is to an understanding of this 'very stuff' that we now turn.

The national Thing

Žižek's (1993) conception of the national Thing is one closely aligned with the contention that any recourse to nationalism serves to obfuscate some form of trauma and/or social antagonism which surrounds a sudden sense loss (this is evident in his account of ethnic nationalism during the disintegration of Yugoslavia). Indeed, the significance of this loss is not held solely by former Communist states, but by any nation/nation-state (East or West) which resorts to a narrative of decline or inhibited development. Consequently, while references to the apparent decline of US society have permeated throughout the history of the US, equally, in England, 'political discourse … regularly revolves around some supposed crisis of the nation and national values' (Finlayson, 1998, 156 see also Author, 2019a).

Notably, it is the sense in which something has been 'lost' which gives support to the suggestion that there is a certain set of, albeit contested, national characteristics that are believed to constitute the nation. Though these characteristics are encapsulated in national activities –

which, in most cases, tend to be shared across a variety of nations – they nonetheless maintain an 'indefinable "Thing"': indeed, 'a belief that there is more to these activities than what appears on the surface' (Finlayson, 1998, 155). Finlayson (1998, 155) continues:

> rather than being thought of as adding up to some gestalt, some way of life greater than the parts of which it consists, the Thing is thought of as producing these rituals. Thus it is imagined that there is something behind them that gives them consistency. That something is the nation imagined as an essence which produces all these practices and makes them cohere into a universal yet particular way of life.

This imagined sense of 'consistency' is reflected in the various attempts to define or even construct the nation. When delineating any specific characteristic, one is 'inevitably circl[ing] around the Thing, rather than capturing its "essence" directly' (Solomon, 2014, 678). Accordingly, while a variety of signifiers are used to 'pin down' the nation and its values (Author, 2019b); what becomes clear, however, is that this proliferation speaks more to an attempt to cover-over the 'constitutive lack' which underscores 'the nation' (Solomon, 2014). To this extent, Kingsbury (2011, 722, italics added) highlights how 'the national Thing is not an ultimate truth or authentic reality that is blocked or hidden by discourse', instead, 'the Thing emerges out of the *limits, inconsistencies, and impasses of discourses*'. Solomon (2014, 678) helpfully summarises this significance, when he notes that any discursive construction, and any attempt to conceive of the nation's essence, bears no objective correlate, but instead reveals the various 'ways of covering over the incompleteness – the lack – of a "whole" nation'.

This inability to name the 'Thing' suggests an inherent tautology (Žižek, 1993). Though the Thing refers to a certain set of features, which are believed to constitute a specific national 'way of life':

> The Thing is not directly a collection of these features; there is 'something more' in it, something that *is present* in these features, that *appears* through them. Members of a community who partake in a given 'way of life' *believe in their Thing*, where this belief has a reflexive structure proper to the intersubjective space: 'I believe in the (national) Thing' is equal to 'I believe that others (members of my community) believe in the Thing.' The tautological

> character of the Thing – its semantic void, the fact that all we can say about it is that it is 'the real Thing' – is founded precisely in this paradoxical reflexive structure. The national Thing exists as long as members of the community believe in it; it is literally an effect of this belief in itself. (Žižek, 1993, 202).

This supports the contention that one's relation to a specific nation is itself a relation to the process of identification. Moreover, it reveals how the 'impossible fullness of meaning' underscores what Lacanian analysis refers to as the Master-Signifier (Žižek, 2000, 370). Notably, the Master-Signifier represents an empty form, so that 'its meaning is "imaginary" in the sense that its content is impossible to positivize' (Žižek, 2000, 370). While Master-Signifiers can vary, the nation represents such a signifier in that 'when you ask a member of the Nation to define in what the identity of his Nation consists, his ultimate answer will always be: "I can't say, you must feel it, it's *it*, what our lives are really about"' (Žižek, 2000: 370).

It is this strange sense of 'absence', which undoubtedly underscores the nation's felt 'presence'; furthermore, it is this absence which provides a sense of objectivity: a belief which goes beyond the individual subject. As a result, the nation's empty form can evoke great feelings of pleasure and pain, most notable during moments of sporting competition (Kingsbury, 2011). Additionally, while fully aware of the nation's 'constructed' nature, it is, in effect, our disavowal of this knowledge which serves only to support the nation's naturalness. Essentially, even when we know better, national sporting events continue to elicit a form of enjoyment that belies our knowledge and understanding (Author, 2020a). Take, for example, McMillan's (2015, 557) account of New Zealand (and his New Zealandness):

> I can deconstruct my understanding of nationhood to its core and know very well that it is a historical social construction used to justify many things I find politically unacceptable. And, yet, not only will I be drawn to any reference to my native New Zealand in a foreign newspaper, but I will passionately yell while watching New Zealand competing in sport in a manner beyond any rational explanation; moreover, in a sure sign of emotional attachment, any negativity expressed toward New Zealand (including criticism I wholly agree with, such as of the country's current climate change policies) will produce a flutter of irritation in me.

McMillan's (2015) sporting reference serves to reveal how the national Thing maintains a level of sublimity that is 'permeated and sustained by unusually intense outbreaks of enjoyment' (Kingsbury, 2011, 722). Outside of sport, this 'intense enjoyment' is evoked during violent moments of ethnic conflict that bear witness to nationalism's transcendent quality. In effect, however, one's utter fanaticism for the nation, reveals an illusion that one can gain 'direct access to the Thing' (Žižek, 1993, 222). Though such access is not possible, the immaterialism of the Thing nonetheless *materializes* in intense forms of enjoyment, which can be evidenced in examples of popular nationalism (Wood, 2012). It is in this respect that we can begin to trace the relation between the national Thing and Lacan's account of *jouissance*. Untranslated, the term *jouissance* denotes a form of enjoyment characterized by pleasure in pain. Here, Lacan draws upon the Freudian notion of '*das Ding*' (the Thing) in order to locate 'the Thing as an incarnation of the impossible *jouissance*' (Cohen, 1995, 351).[3] In sum: 'the "Thing" is "enjoyment incarnated"' (Finlayson, 1998, 155).

In what follows, it will be argued that 'a nation exists insofar as it is a national Thing that is materialized through social practices of enjoyment' (Kingsbury, 2011, 722); with sport providing one notable social practice. To do so, however, will require a brief recourse through some key characteristics which help to elucidate upon the significance of the national Thing as well as provide it a certain analytical importance. This will include a discussion of fantasy, the Other/other, and the Real. A specific consideration on sport and the national Thing will conclude.

Fantasy

As evident in Žižek's (2008a, 2008b) work on ideology and fantasy, it is through fantasy that our relation to reality achieves a form of ontological consistency: it is not that we have reality then fantasy, but that our capacity to conceive of reality requires fantasy. To this end, the role of the Thing can help supplement the work of fantasy, by providing the substance that establishes a sense of national unity. What remains significant, therefore, is how the national Thing serves as a fantasy-object which masks the lack in 'reality' as well as those antagonisms which are believed to befall the national community. We can see this in the resort to racist fantasies which reveal a desire to mask social antagonisms that undermine the national community or bring it into disrepute. As seen in the 'Jew', under Nazi Germany, it was the racist fantasies within the Nazi regime which conceived of the Jew's 'removal' as justified in helping to maintain society's 'natural' hierarchy.

What is apparent, however, is that the 'The Thing is … an impossible object of fantasy' (Dean, 2005, 161), forever unobtainable and always out of reach. Again, this is not to ignore or downplay the fantasies that constitute and give life to the nation;

rather, it is to highlight how the recourse to fantasy underscores the nation's non-existence. Bentley (2007, 486) provides further clarification with regard to Englishness: 'Englishness does not exist in reality; it is constructed in our fantasy space. This means, … that it does have a form of symbolic existence and can be recognized as a chain of signifiers', conceived as 'a cycle of open symbols that do not have referents in the real world but are in a continuous *glissement* with each other'. Notably, this 'fantasy space' proves useful in obscuring or even downplaying those real antagonisms which remain inherent to society (and not just those within former fascist regimes).

For example, if we consider the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' message, which adorned a whole range of paraphernalia (mugs; posters; t-shirts; internet memes) following the 2008 financial crash, then it becomes apparent that the significance of the 'war-time slogan' was one that appeared to 'tap[p] into an already established narrative about Britain's "finest hour"' (Hatherley, 2016, 17). Hatherley (2016, 17) asserts how, post-2008:

> The 'Keep Calm and Carry On' poster seemed to embody all the contradictions produced by a consumption economy attempting to adapt itself to thrift, and to normalize surveillance and security through an ironic, depoliticised aesthetic. Out of apparent nowhere, this image – combining bare, faintly modernist typography with the consoling logo of the Crown and a similarly reassuring message – spread everywhere.

What is significant about the message is that the slogan, and its accompanying poster, were never used during the Second World War, but, rather, were rediscovered in 2000, before being privately reproduced (Hughes, 2009). As evident in Hatherley's account

(2016), its subsequent use meant that any real antagonism brought by the financial crisis was neatly obscured amidst a prevalent and reoccurring Second World War national fantasy. Indeed, one notable way in which these fantasies are maintained is through our relations with the Other/other.

The Other/other

As evident from the previous section, our recourse to fantasy allows us, on the one hand, 'to convince subjects that they once had the lost object that they never had', while, on the other, 'provid[ing] a narrative for explaining the absence that exists within every signifying structure' (McGowan, 2015, 51-52). Notably, the 'the Nation-Thing as enjoyment is produced by the continual fear of its loss' (Finlayson, 1998, 155), from which this 'fear' becomes embroiled in fantasies that perceive this loss as residing in the Other or as stolen by the other. The capitalization/non-capitalization of the Other/other, in this instance, refers to two forms of 'other' which underscore Lacanian theory. While 'the Other' refers to the 'big Other', a naïve 'third person' that maintains and upholds the 'Law' of social interaction (insofar as subjects believe in the Law);[4] 'the other' refers to another subject – i.e. an individual or group. What is unique to both accounts, however, is the extent to which we enjoy fantasizing about the Other/other's enjoyment (Dean, 2007). For the subject, fantasy can provide some sense of 'completeness', via one's enjoyment *through* an Other.

For example, if we consider the Holocaust, it is apparent that one's capacity to follow through with prescribed orders, as evident in Arendt's (2006) account of Adolph Eichmann, relied upon one's allegiance to the Other – in this case, the Führer, head of the symbolic Law (Adolph Hitler). Yet, in contrast to Arendt (2006), we can assert that

one's capacity to follow the Law was not attributable to the apparent sincerity of one's 'banal' actions (merely following orders), but by the *disavowed* enjoyment that occurred through the fantasy that permitted the individual to unquestionably follow the declarations of the Other, i.e. 'the Führer/Nazi ideology' (a similar process can be identified by those who kill in the name of 'God'). The ideological significance of this disavowal is that it maintains a level of enjoyment that allows one to commit and partake in certain actions that they may later admonish or even regret. In either case, such disavowal helps to point to those examples of national mobilization, exuberance and even violence, that collectively embodies a group of individuals.

Nevertheless, the success of this fantasy relies upon identifying those others who seek to steal our enjoyment, i.e. our national Thing. Here the 'essence' which underscores our 'way of life' – the national Thing which only *we* can possess and the subsequent enjoyment that can be gained from this 'access' – is an enjoyment that is routinely under threat from the other (equally, the other can expel too much 'enjoyment', thus leading to the derision of *their* enjoyment, which *they* unashamedly flaunt). Dean (2005, 163) elaborates:

> Others are always trying to take our Thing. Or, that's what we think because this is the only way we have a Thing in the first place. … National myths organize a community with reference to external threats. These threats threaten our national Thing. To this extent, we need others: they provide the mechanism through which, via fantasy, we organize our enjoyment. If others don't steal our enjoyment, we won't have it. In this way, the others are actually part of us.

Dean's (2005) final sentence offers a neat conclusion to the relation between fantasy and the other: that is, it is in accordance with the other that the fantasies we create serve to speak to our own inherent antagonisms, and their subsequent obfuscation.

The Real

If the Thing is always circled and never found; if the Thing forever eludes symbolization, but, nonetheless, continues to evoke the process of symbolization; and, if it is under the rubric of the national Thing that some of our most enjoyable experiences are orchestrated – then, it is clear that we are always dealing with 'The Thing [as] an enigmatic leftover or stain of *the Real* that lacks determinate existence and eludes straightforward interpretation' (Kingsbury, 2011, 717, italics added). Certainly, the notion of the Real remains one of Lacan's most unique and important conceptions. Though indefinable, the Real is that which always returns; it is a disruptive phenomenon that disturbs any social or phantasmatic arrangement. In the case of the national Thing, this is further reflected by the fact that:

> The mythic point of origin around which nationalism revolves is actually nothing but a gap or void that is positivized through the actions of believers. Fantasy functions so as to camouflage the Real antagonism that ruptures any (allegedly) organic, social unification. (Wood, 2012, 37).

As evident in Wood's (2012) account, the Real is not an outside force impeding on our symbolic and imaginary constructions, but, rather, part of them. It is the Real rupture of any nationalism, which reveals its constructed precarity (Authors et al., 2020) and it

is the Real which undermines and dislodges the myths that the nation is founded upon. Bentley (2007, 487) continues:

> Žižek goes on to talk of the 'Nothingness' that Lacan identifies at the moment when the Real surfaces as the radical threat to the Symbolic scaffolding upon which the structure hangs. Because the Real is that which is 'impossible to symbolize', then it appears as a hole or lack in the fabric of the symbolic network of signifiers that make up the nation.

By examining the effects of the Real in relation to England's imperial past, Bentley (2007) notes how the violence of this imperial history can be traced in the ongoing contestations that underscore British multiculturalism (Author, 2019c). Here, multiculturalism becomes a repetitive event that continually struggles with the horrors of the Real (the Real of England's imperial past).

However, while the Real can serve to dislodge national myths – exposing the nation's inherent emptiness – it can also disturb and ignite the 'strong economy of *jouissance* [which] is at work in the identification with one's own "way of life"' (Žižek, 2020, 59). Žižek (2005, 597-598) confirms:

> Perhaps the most notable case was the disastrous collapse of international solidarity within the worker's movement in the face of 'patriotic' euphoria at the outbreak of the First World War. Today, it is difficult to imagine what a traumatic shock it was for the leaders of all currents of social democracy and socialism, … when the social-democratic parties of all countries (with the exception of the Bolsheviks in Russia and Serbia) gave way to chauvinist

> outbursts, and stood 'patriotically' behind 'their' respective governments, oblivious of the proclaimed solidarity of the working class 'without country'. This shock, the *powerless fascination* felt by its participants, bears witness to an encounter with the Real of enjoyment.

In the final part of this article, consideration will be given to expanding upon the above characteristics in the context of sport.

Sport and the national Thing

It is important to assert that the Thing should not be reduced to the individual and their own private psyche (Kingsbury, 2011). As Kingsbury (2011, 721) explains, 'the Thing is first and foremost intersubjective, that is, a social phenomenon'. Yet, it is a unique social phenomenon; one akin to the unique brand of dialectical materialism that Žižek's (2014) philosophical outlook provides: a materialism without matter. This outlook underscores Sharpe and Boucher's (2010, 59) assertion that 'People *enjoy* their ideological commitments in such "ineffable" moments – and this is a visceral, passionate Thing'. In fact, if the remark: '"You had to be there" is something a political subject often says to an uncomprehending outsider' (Sharpe and Boucher, 2010, 56); equally, we can begin to see how such remarks are given an added importance in the context of national sporting moments. Ultimately, the national Thing allows us to pay closer attention to such ineffable moments in sport, shedding further light on how the significance of enjoyment (*jouissance*) helps to maintain and uphold an ethnic community.

To this end, while we can all imagine the various ways in which sport's sense of collective enjoyment is experienced – cheering in crowded pubs during international competitions; watching the clock countdown during the final round of our favourite boxer; or, anxiously awaiting the medical update on our nation's 'star' player – the qualities that underscore such practices, pay homage to the fragmentary, yet Real, nature of the Thing.

That is, the national Thing cannot be enjoyed individually, but, is 'sustained by shared practices of belief' (Kingsbury, 2011, 728). This belief – the belief in our national team, for example – is what 'becomes inscribed within' the practice of sports fans: it is the fan's 'presuppositions of the existence of other passionate fans that share an enjoyment of and belief in the national team' (Kingsbury, 2011, 721). Conceived as 'materialized enjoyment', we can begin to ascertain 'why it is precisely "nationalism' that is the privileged domain of the eruption of enjoyment into the social field' (Žižek, 1992, 165). While Žižek (1991, 165) asserts that it is 'the national Cause [which] is ultimately the way subjects of a given nation organize their collective enjoyment through national myths', we can expand upon such comments by considering how these 'Causes' become collectively enacted during national sporting moments. Here, 'the objects, practices, and relations of sports' (Kingsbury, 2011, 720), play a unique role in organizing this collective enjoyment, with the sublime object of ideology being emotionally displayed during national sporting successes. But how does this enjoyment emerge in examples of sport, and, more importantly, how does the national Thing allow us to explore the 'national' enjoyment that sport provokes? To answer these questions, we can return to our previous characteristics.

Sport and the national Thing: the role of fantasy, the Other/other and the Real

Certainly, the globalization of sport has not hindered the development of sporting nationalisms. In fact, as evident in the array of emerging/developing nations, who have hosted international sporting mega-events, sporting success suggests one way in which sport can be used to express one's 'national' status on an international stage. Moreover, this process proves amiable to promoting a number of 'ethnic fantasies' concerning the nation, as highlighted in media coverage (Author, 2019b). Indeed, the relation between national fantasies and sport serves to reveal 'the kernel of enjoyment at the heart of nationalist discourse (a "piece of the Real")' with 'official' events and sporting occasions being 'mediated through fantasy' (Collins and Hannifin, 2001, 69). Here, the unique way that sport evokes national fantasies – often centering around past sporting successes – highlights the extent to which the nation's ontological consistency remains tied to a fantasmatic support that upholds and maintains nationalist ideology.

Consequently, sport remains a unique platform for these national fantasies to be produced and maintained; yet, such fantasies (such as, sport's inherent meritocracy; sense of 'fair play'; and declared professionalism) are, in the case of the nation, neither consistent nor infallible. Instead, they remain under continual negotiation and resistance. Kingsbury (2011, 722) notes:

> Sport, … is the global activity par excellence that offers people social fantasies that coordinate people's desire for objects teeming with sublimity and cosmic relevance. Crucially, the national Thing is not an ultimate truth or authentic reality that is blocked or hidden by discourse. Rather, the Thing emerges out of the limits, inconsistencies, and impasses of discourses.

It is these 'limits, inconsistencies, and impasses' which are frequently highlighted in critical analyses of sporting mega-events. It is amidst such inconsistency that the relation between sport's projected desires and the national Thing can be found.

Furthermore, to support one's nation immediately places them in contrast to a national opposition; an opposition that is usually marked by fierce rivalries and a 'more than just a game' incentive (Whigham, 2014). Accordingly, sport's ability to distinguish between the national 'us' and 'them' remains a widely recited theme in political as well as media discourses of sporting events (Authors et al., 2020; Author and Author, 2020). However, while these discourses, 'help to define who "we" are in contrast to "them"', Solomon (2014, 678) emphasizes how the construction of these boundaries can serve to 'function as the signifiers of a national subject'. Echoing Dean's (2007) previous contention, the contrast delineated between the self and other, emphasizes how the act of 'describing who "we" are' helps to 'construct a fantasy that covers over the subject's lack of full presence' (Solomon, 2014, 678). In other words, it is *through the other* that the national collective and national subject, achieve some sense of 'full presence' in the face of an inherent absence. This lack is accentuated when one considers the excessive characterizations which underpin the framing of those athletes who are conceived as not 'belonging' to the nation (Author et al., 2020). Ultimately, these contentions reveal more about the forms of 'circling' that mark the Thing's periphery: the lack at its heart.

Equally, this 'lack' is neatly 'covered over … through phantasmatic assumptions of fullness, closure and resolution, which is achieved through the '"organisation of enjoyment" through an Other' (Finlayson, 1998, 155). Again, sport offers a unique setting for the organisation of such enjoyment. In particular, what we observe during sporting occasions is how such events can, paradoxically, have nothing

to do 'with [one's] conscious awareness', but instead, reveal a 'truth' which occurs through the sporting event itself (Žižek, 2006, 66).[5] In effect: sport projects a collective form whose tangible significance bears no relation to the inherent logics of the sporting practice, but which, nonetheless, gains some level of significance from the sense of belief that is externalized *via the practice* (Author, 2020a). Such a contention follows Žižek's (2001) countering of the 'psychological' assumption that belief 'takes place inside people's heads or psyches', arguing instead that 'belief is materially externalized in material social practices' (Kingsbury, 2011, 729). These 'material social practices' highlight how 'The national Thing is concretized through the effects of belief via the social practices of loyalty, service, and even sacrifice for a nation' (Kingsbury, 2011, 729). In the case of sport, this externalization of belief is maintained *in* the belief that one holds for their national team/performer (Kingsbury, 2011), but also in the sense of obligation that one must 'watch' their national team. In doing so, belief is externalized through an Other, such as, the symbolic 'patriots at play', who come to represent and embody the nation's sporting desires (Tuck and Maguire, 1999). Ultimately, our relation to sport – and the nation – bears a certain ex-timacy.[6]

Finally, though sport and the national Thing display clear fantasmatic elements, grounded in relations with the Other/other, they also bear an advertence of the Real. The Real in sport can be identified in those moments of excessive *jouissance*; in the agony, but also the utter astonishment that sporting moments can invigorate. It is also there in those moments of disruption, evident in Kingbury's (2011) reference to the injury suffered by Wayne Rooney before the 2006 World Cup. He notes:

> six weeks before the start of England's 2006 World Cup campaign, Wayne Rooney – an integral part of England's chances of winning the World Cup –

> fractured a metatarsal bone in his right foot. In the following hours and days, an estimated 3000 articles in newspapers, on the Web, and even academic medical journals focused on Rooney's metatarsal by speculating on whether or not he would be fit to play, and, if so, whether he would be effective or not. Media speculation even incited the creation of healrooney.com, a website established to expedite Rooney's recovery. Users were invited to move their cursor arrow over an image of Rooney's foot and tap into the "power of positivity". In this example, Rooney's metatarsal occupies the place of the Thing and becomes a sublime object because of all the fuss and panic. (Kingsbury, 2011, 722).[7]

Though Kingsbury's (2011) example relates the significance of Rooney's injury in relation to the national Thing (with Rooney's metatarsal itself occupying the sublime object), it is important to frame these actions in relation to that excessive *jouissance* which seems to accompany the bizarre array of mediated activities that the injury evoked. Such excesses underscore the inherent lack which occupies the national Thing: the unremitting concern that to do 'something' is better than nothing.

Conclusion

The underlying aim of this article has been to introduce a psychoanalytic approach to the study of sport and nationalism, as described in Žižek's conception of the national Thing. Notably, it has been argued that this Thing bears a unique relation to the sense of enjoyment that is procured through sport and sporting events that involve the nation. Indeed, as noted by Kingsbury (2011), for many, the relationship between sport, nationalism and enjoyment remains understudied. Often, sport's enjoyable moments

are simply viewed as forms of 'ideological delusion'. To this end, Žižek's conception of the national Thing offers a unique path for navigating these 'delusions'.

In part, we can observe this navigation via the clear reason that, despite our 'postmodern epoch' (which remains indebted to global infrastructures and intra-state organisations), nationalism maintains a unique and passionately defended importance. Here, sport continues to provide an essential context for one's enjoyment in their nation to be expressed and shared. However, central to this enjoyment is the extent to which the national Thing offers both a subjective and intersubjective relevance in examining the ongoing significance of national myths, fantasies and ideology. If there is, as Whigham (2014) asserts, the potential to 'over-politicse' one's political attachments in the context of national sport; then, evidently, such national attachments can reveal other forms of enjoyment that encourages one to watch, support and partake in national sporting spectacles and its associated 'national' rivalries.

In fact, though it is widely noted that the nation maintains some form of connection with particular groups – which, in light of the nation's history (Smith, 2012), frequently draws upon contingent elements (Anderson, 2006; Gellner, 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) that both frame and limit how one is to belong and/or perform the nation (Edensor, 2002; Billig, 1995; Author, et al. 2020) – Žižek's use of the national Thing posits no definite center and no objective correlate to defining what the nation 'is'. However, though we may assert the inherent incompleteness which constitutes the nation, it is through a 'temporally bound incompleteness and consequent sparking of desire' that sport's mediated enjoyment can allow us to see how 'The social construction of the "nation" is always "distorted by desire" channeled through the various discourses in which it is named' (Solomon, 2014, 678). In the case of this

article, such construction has been related to the mediated experiences that constitute sport's inter*national* enjoyment.

To conclude, future research can continue this line of inquiry in relation to sporting spectacles, that so often provide a 'sit[e] for the assertion and affirmation of particular discursive constructions of nation' (Silk and Falcous, 2005, 454). While these 'constructions' offer carefully choreographed and performative segments, which seek to highlight the nation's past in accordance with its present, equally, these spectacles can be examined for their retroactive staging of 'the nation's' past. Here, the evocation of national myths and the nation's 'origin' – key themes in any opening ceremony – can be examined for the various ways in which they retroactively obfuscate the nation's contingent underpinnings. This contingency is laid bare by observing the 'imagined' origins and sense of consistency which the national Thing requires. Moreover, these displays offer a unique opportunity to explore examples of *jouissance* in the context of sport, with Walters (2014, 115) suggesting that the FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*) World Cup remains 'the world's most popular mass mediated conduit of *jouissance*'. Ultimately, by drawing upon the national Thing, one can offer unique and valuable insights into the relationship between sport and nationalism as well as an array of social and political antagonisms, which, despite the well-rehearsed proclamation that sport and politics do not mix, continue to exhibit sport's political significance.

Endnotes

[1] Comparably, this 'return' to some form of 'origin' – however tenuous – is identified in Collins and Hannifin's comments on the founding of the Irish Constitution. They highlight how 'The Irish Constitution admirably performs this task by "founding" the Nation through the very act of "officially" announcing its existence. As the country had enjoyed neither national unity nor political independence at any period in the modern age, the declaration of nationhood had to be grounded in an appeal to an idyllic "Golden Age" of the Gaels' (Collins and Hannifin, 2001, 61).

[2] Admittedly, the desire for the World Cup can be transferred to the English national team (male or female) bringing any sort of trophy 'home'.

[3] Daly (2014, 80) elaborates 'Enjoyment can be characterized as a kind of existential electricity that not only animates the subject but also threatens to destroy them. … If the body of Frankenstein's monster is the intelligible symbolic structure, then lightning is the raw substance of enjoyment that reflects the primordial character of human drives and obsessions'.

[4] Notably, the big Other is also 'split', with cynics often resorting to paranoid conspiracies revealing an 'Other of the (big) Other', who, secretly, 'pulls the strings'.

[5] This contention is drawn from Žižek's (2006) account of Hegel's comments on the 'marriage ceremony'.

[6] Extimacy (*extimité*) refers to the problematization of a clear 'inside' and 'outside' for the subject.

[7] Similar examples were also evident in a previous injury sustained by England 'golden boy' David Beckham before the 2002 World Cup.

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